



# Lab volunteers make adobe bricks at Ohkay Owingeh

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It's hot, and the sun is beating down on a dirt field near the center of the Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo. More than twenty Laboratory volunteers are keeping up a steady pace of activity as work making adobe bricks to help the restoration project that's bringing life back to the heart of the pueblo.

Under the supervision of experienced builders from the pueblo, some volunteers stand beside the two mixers set up at one end of the space, adding the right combination of sand, clay mud, straw and water, and then dumping the mixed adobe into wheelbarrows.

The barrows are heaved to the end of three rows of bricks, where other volunteers shovel the heavy brown mixture into wooden forms laid on the ground, while still more on their knees knead the mud into the corners of forms, smooth off the tops and carefully pull the forms straight up. As the wet mud gives up its hold on the wood, two new bricks are revealed, with smooth straight edges.

"This form of construction is a part of my culture," says volunteer Leonard Manzanares. "My grandparents' home is constructed purely of adobe, and my parents' home is a hybrid of adobe and modern construction materials. I had never had the opportunity to make adobe bricks so I was genuinely interested in the process."

Once they're dried thoroughly, these bricks made by Lab volunteers and their families (the children are proving to be particularly skilled and dedicated adobe workers) will be used to restore more of the ancestral homes in the 700-year-old pueblo core.

At lunchtime the volunteers take a welcome break and have frito pies and fry bread at the pueblo's community center while Tomasita Duran, the executive director of the [Ohkay Owingeh Housing Authority](#) gives the group some history on context on the restoration project.

Since 2006, the [restoration of the four connecting plazas](#) at the historic center of the pueblo has seen 30 families return to renovated houses, bringing life back to the area known as Owe'neh Bupingeh, the setting for traditional observances and the spiritual and social center of the community.

The bricks the group is making will be used to help in the next phase of the project, which expects to restore 20 more homes in the area.

"When we were deciding on how to do the renovations, the historic preservation people asked us what period in the past did we want to restore the houses to," Duran says.

"We told them we don't want to design for the past, but for the future."

This balance of using traditional techniques and honoring the history in the buildings while making them work for families now (and into the future) has been one of the keys to the success of the project.

Then, with sunblock reapplied and hats and muddy gloves back on, it's back to work for the Laboratory volunteers. By 2:30 p.m. the mixers' rumble is silenced: there's no more clay left, and over 700 new bricks lie drying in three long columns.

"The most satisfying part of the day was looking at all those adobes and thinking about all the hard work and sweat that went into them, knowing that they would help preserve and restore the pueblo dwellings," says Manzanares. "The area of Ohkay Owingeh is a site of historical significance for the Spanish and Native American cultures in Northern New Mexico. Many friends of mine grew up there and I felt that it was a great way to pay it forward."

"Help from the surrounding community is always greatly appreciated and is the perfect way to raise awareness and engage with folks beyond Ohkay Owingeh," says Leslie Colley, development officer for the housing authority. "There is a long history between the Laboratory and this place and it is exciting to see that in tangible ways, such as this adobe brick making."

[\*\*> Learn more about the restoration project and how you can help\*\*](#)

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